

Robert's Rules Simplified

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Introduction: Col. Robert, a Civil War officer, wrote down a set of procedures for use by deliberative bodies derived from the rules of the House of Representatives. It has become conventional for organizations to adopt these rules and then modify them for their specific purposes. Most by-laws contain a statement such as "In all situations not addressed by these by-laws, Robert's Rules of Order shall apply". The organization is free, of course, to change any rule in Robert's that they wish

General Overview: The body, once convened, must have business before it. The only two pieces of business that are in order are (1) considering and perfecting motions, and (2) hearing reports (from officers, committees, or other individuals).

Conduct of Meetings: Members speak only when recognized by the chair, and address all remarks to the chair, and not to other members. The chair should try to alternate pro and con speakers, and should not recognize anyone who has spoken to the motion while there are others wishing to speak who have not yet been recognized. The chair does not recognize members who speak without being recognized (spoken calls for the question should be ignored). The only time it is permissible for a member to speak without being recognized is when the member thinks that the rules of order are not being followed. The member may say out loud "Point of order", and the chair recognizes him.

Types of Motions: There are two types of motions; (1) main motions and their amendments, and (2) subsidiary motions, which regulate how to deal with the main motion before the body.

Voting: The chair should restate the question before voting, and should explain to members the significance of yes and no votes on a complicated question. The chair may, at her discretion, call for a voice vote or a show of hands. Any member has the right to ask for a count (call for a division) after a voice vote, and the chair must immediately comply.

If the vote is a tie, the motion fails. The chair does not vote, except where her vote will change the decision. Thus, if the vote is a tie, the chair may vote aye, and if the motion passes by one vote, the chair may vote nay to make a tie vote and cause the motion to fail.

Main Motions: Assume that there is no motion on the floor. The chair recognizes a member, who makes a motion. The chair asks for a second. If there is none, the motion dies. If there is a second, the chair then invites the maker of the motion to speak. Once the motion is seconded, any other main motion is out of order.

After the motion is seconded, it belongs to the body, and not to the maker and seconder. They may not withdraw it, and have no special powers to make or accept amendments. The chair recognizes speakers pro and con, and when there are none left, calls for a vote.

Once a decision has been reached on any motion or amendment, it cannot be considered again at the same meeting (there are some exceptions to this rule). After the question is decided, the floor is open for other motions.

Amendments: During the course of debate, a member who has been recognized may say "I move an amendment". The amendment always has the form "Strike ... , and add ..." . Either the strike part or the add part may be missing. The special case of striking the entire motion, and adding other words is called a substitute motion (but is treated exactly like any other amendment). Amendments should be germane, but that is usually interpreted loosely.

The chair asks for a second, and if one is forthcoming, invites the maker to speak to the amendment. Debate continues, but now must be restricted to the question "Is the amendment desirable or not?". Speeches for or against the main motion are out of order. With a substitute motion, the question is "Which is better, the old motion or the substitute?". A speaker who says "I am against both the main motion and the substitute" is out of order.

When there are no more speakers, a vote is taken on whether to amend (or substitute). If the amendment (or substitute) passes, the amended motion then becomes the main motion, is debated, and finally voted on. If it fails, then the main motion continues to be debated as it was before the amendment was moved. Note that a winning substitute must win two votes. One on whether to replace main with substitute, and a second on whether or not to pass substitute. It is not uncommon for a substitute to win the first vote and lose the second. (E.g., an unpopular motion is moved. A member then proposes a substitute to weaken it, and it passes. The body is then perfectly free to reject the substitute (which says that they like neither the original nor the substitute).

Second Order Amendments: It is permissible to move an amendment(A2) to an amendment(A1) to a main motion(M), but not an amendment to an amendment to an amendment. The order of business then becomes "Should A1 be amended by A2?". If A2 wins that vote, the question then becomes "Should M be amended by A2?" If this passes, then the question is "Should the amended M pass or fail?" Note that if A2 is a substitute motion, the exact same motion must win three votes before it is adopted.

Subsidiary Motions: All motions other than main motions or amendments are called subsidiary motions, and are procedural in nature. There is a hierarchy of such motions. A motion higher up on the scale can be moved while a motion lower on the scale is on the floor. (Robert uses the word "privilege" to describe the hierarchy.) A list of the more common subsidiary motions is given below, listed in order of privilege (i.e., a motion to adjourn is always in order, no matter what is on the floor). All require a second, are debatable, can be amended, and require a majority to pass unless otherwise indicated. In general, those motions that are not debatable require 2/3 to pass.

Adjourn	No debate, no amendment
Table	No debate, no amendment, 2/3
Previous Question	No debate, no amendment, 2/3
Suspend the Rules	No debate, no amendment, 2/3
Postpone to the Next Meeting	
Refer to Committee	
Postpone Indefinitely	

Postpone Indefinitely: Self-explanatory.

Refer to Committee: Self-explanatory. Possible amendments might be to what committee, for how long, with what instructions, etc.

Postpone to the Next Meeting: Also self explanatory. .

Suspend the Rules: By a 2/3 vote, the body can suspend any of Robert's rules, or any of the rules of their bylaws that the bylaws do not expressly forbid.

Previous Question: This motion cuts off all debate, and if it passes, the body must proceed immediately to a vote. After it is moved and seconded, there can be no other discussion, and the chair calls for an immediate vote (NB: Since the motion to table or the motion to adjourn is higher on the privilege list than previous question, a motion to table or adjourn is in order even though the previous question has been moved and voted on). If the previous question passes by 2/3, the chair immediately calls for a vote on the motion on the floor. If a member is not recognized, and shouts out "question", or if a member is recognized, makes an argument pro or con the motion on the floor, and then moves the previous question, the chair must rule the motion out of order. (I.e., no debate applies to the person making the motion as well as everyone else.)

Table: Tabling is a motion that often leads to dispute. The idea behind it is to give the body the power to put something aside temporarily so that an urgent issue can be addressed. Tabling thus takes a motion from the floor, and lays it on the table. Since it is presumed urgent, no debate is allowed.

Tabling is rarely used in this way, however. It is mostly used to defeat a motion without forcing members to vote against it. According to Robert's, if the intent really is to put it aside temporarily to address an urgent matter, only a majority vote is required. However, if the intent is to kill, then a 2/3 vote is required. The chair must make the decision. Since it is invariably used to kill, most people are used to a 2/3 requirement.

There is one difference between tabling and voting a motion down. If a motion is defeated, it cannot be brought up again in the same meeting. If it is tabled, however, it is perfectly in order for someone to move to "take the motion from the table", and if that motion passes, then the tabled motion becomes the main motion once again.

Adjourn: The motion to adjourn is always in order, no matter what the body is in the midst of doing. It takes precedence over whatever motion is pending.

Unanimous Consent: Unanimous consent is a useful device for the chair to move business along quickly on non-controversial actions that are awkward with Robert's. Suppose someone in the debate notes a better way to word something that the chair judges is not a substantive change. She may then ask the body for unanimous consent to make the change. If anyone objects, then it must be handled as an amendment according to the usual procedures.

Points of Order, Rulings by the Chair, and Appeals: A member who believes that the body (or chair) is not following the rules may say "Point of Order", and explain. A speaker may make a point of order without being recognized. It is the only exception to the rule that no one can speak without being recognized. The chair then gives a ruling. She may or may not ask the parliamentarian for advice, but the responsibility and ruling is that of the chair.

When the chair makes a ruling, any member may move to overturn that ruling (i.e., "appeal" to the body). The motion to appeal requires a second, is debatable, and passes by majority vote. The chair should ask the vice-chair to preside during an appeal.